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A Brief Assessment Of Neopagan Theology

As offered by Cyprian at the Pan-Pagan Festival August, 1980

Creation...

Physicists currently interpret physical creation, that is, the universe as we know it, as having occurred within a time span o about three minutes...the "Big Bang." Our physical universe is thought to have been created with the explosion of a hyper-dense particle which contained every bit of matter and energy that now exists in the universe, including the matter which forms our living bodies as we meet here today. This hyper-dense super molecule also is thought to have been quite small. Dr. Leon Friedman, director of the FermiLab near Chicago, has indicated it may have been no larger than a basket ball. Into this "ball" was jammed all matter and all energy in our universe. It remained there until some creative force, some creative urge, disrupted the status of this primal "egg" and set into being the universe as we know it. this event occurred with the so-called "Big Bang," echoes of which have been detected by scientific instruments.

Our interpretation of the nature of this creative force or creative urge is opposed to that of Judeo-Christianity in that we perceive it as feminine...they see it as masculine. We hold that pre-creation was feminine and this divergence in concept of first Things, creation, forever separates our Neopagan world-view from the Judeo-Christians. Briefly consider this, and you may want to dwell upon it later, our Goddess, of Her own will, receives Her consort, the God whom she created, and from Their union our creation is ever revived and sustained. The Christian reviver and sustainer, on the other hand, was conceived in a most singular manner. The omnipotent God sent a neuter third party messenger, and angel, to announce to a virgin that she was pregnant with the child, Jesus. So there. Zap! What a put-down! What revival and sustenance can we find in such a sterile and asexual concept? Even masculine old Zeus copulated with human females so at least somebody got some fun out of the process! What we Neopagans find difficult to understand is why Judeo-Christianity so vehemently turned its back on sex and not just sex as a physical act but also sex as a gender, specifically, sex as a feminine gender.

When we seek to deal with Creation we also must situate our place as human beings within the totality of Creation. The orthodox Judeo-Christian view gives humans a special place within Creation; that is, that we are not part of general creation but a special creation..."Man was created in the image of God"...and the rest of creation is our plaything..."Yours is the earth and everything on it." There is no need to expound upon our rejection of these two

fundamental points: of course we are not created in any special way, any more than is a rock or a tree or a raccoon or a galaxy, nor do we have dominion over anything. We are a part of general creation along with every other particle of matter in the universe.

I hope you grasp the vast difference this makes; it forever separates us from the Judeo-Christian heritage and it s a gulf that cannot be bridged. They must forever consider themselves special and we must forever consider ourselves general and one with creation. And it is given to us to look at a grain of sand and in that grain see the sum total of creation and to see ourselves as part of it and to gibe thanks for the creative force of the Goddess and Her consort that sustains this creation.

Chaos...

With Chaos, as with so many other concepts, we must think on at least two levels, the physical and the mythical, to come to any sort of understanding of ourselves and what we really believe about our place in creation. And it is this belief, this understanding that is the ultimate determination of how we live as human beings upon this beautiful Earth. That is what we Neopagans are trying to do right now: learn to think differently that Western man has thought in nearly two-thousand years in order that we may live in a renewed relationship with creation. It is an exciting adventure.

Before there was form, there was Chaos. We may well suppose Chaos represents the disordered formlessness of matter and energy in that initial "Big Bang" of the primordial egg in those first three minutes when creation began. Mythologically, we see this formlessness as before the Earth and Sky were separated, as before the four elements, actually the four states of matter, had coalesced into their separate forms. The myths speak darkly of this time, of the births of the Titans, Cyclops and 100-handed monsters, of a father who devours his own young...what better way to represent Chaos!

We may assume, too, we have our own dark and personal counterpart to this primal Chaos. Is it that black win that whips at the raveled edge o sanity? I believe our ancestors felt far more keenly than we can understand in this present age a constant fear that what order they had managed to being to their lives, indeed, what order they could see in creation around them, would suddenly collapse and they would be plunged into chaos and madness. Greek myths are redolent with stories of madness and possession. Even great Heracles fell victim. It is no wonder, then, the gods of chaos are said to have been chained beneath the Earth, castrated, even devoured. But they still live, they still can escape. Brrr!

And to some degree, escape they have from time to time. How else can we account for the chaos of war, of a Hitler, a Napoleon, a Viet Nam?

Modern psychology recognizes the chaotic madness that dwells in all of us, ever ready to pounce and destroy. We may think of it as a chained and raging primal demi-god, that psychologists probably use more scientific language but when that chain snaps, the result is the same; concentration camps, starvation, and on and on. History is too full of such dismal lists. There is no need to go on with a recitation or horrors.

But that does turn us at once to the next topic...the consideration of evil.

Evil...

Every religion, great and small, has had to wrestle with the problem of evil because evil poses a fundamental question: how can an all-omnipotent god who is all good permit evil to exist?...and this is whether you interpret evil as some dark malevolent Satan or whether you see it as death camps, war, starvation or whatever.

Judeo-Christian theologians have wrestled with the problem of evil since the very beginnings of the Judeo-Christian faith. When boiled down, all the more reasonable answers go something like this: The all-powerful God permits evil to exist so that man, who is created in God's image, may have a choice between good and evil. Ultimately, in the Last Days, evil will be defeated and woe betide those who made the wrong choice! At first glance this seems satisfactory

but we Neopagans cannot accept it because it sets man apart, as being different from the rest of creation. This is absolutely contrary to what we believe. We hold that man is VERY MUCH a natural part of creation and we have no special place in it. We have no more choice between good and evil than the stars or a bumblebee.

To the non-Pagan, then, who asks us to explain the existence of evil we must give a two-fold reply: one, we are not special creatures so we cannot truly know what evil is or if it even exists; that which we perceive with our limited faculties as evil may not be evil at all within the creative scheme. Two, our three-fold Goddess is possessed of a dark visage, the Hag, which we no more understand than we do the Lusting Nymph or the Loving Mother-Creator. The Hag, the Old Woman who lays us out and prepares our remains for the journey to the Land behind the North Wind, is no "Satan" but an integral part of the creative process, which we see as our three-fold Goddess.

If we are pressed hard enough, at the end we must say a Hitler, a Vietnam war, a starving child are all part of the creative process although we cannot pretend to know exactly how or why.

We must confess, too, that a statement we simply don't know and cannot know the nature of evil is easily interpreted as a cop-out. This is not rue in our case, though, because we do not believe in special creation, that is, man is not a special creature molded in the image of the Creator and sharing the Creator's mind. No, man is simply a part of the overall creative urge and therefore it is not given to us to know good and evil anymore than it is to my two cat friends, Buzz and Fang.

But the problem of what we think of as evil is not resolved by casting it aside with a simplistic explanation we are not given to know what it is...although we Neo-Pagans, I think, pretty generally agree this is a true statement. But just because it is true does not put the question to rest. There is another approach, however, and this approach to the problem makes a lot of ultimate sense for us Neo-Pagans.

As stated earlier, the astro-physicists and we agree on the probable pre-creation existence of a super-molecule or, in mythical terms, a "world egg." This egg exploded to create the universe, Creation, as we know it. If we accept this cosmology, and it makes sense with our mythos, then we must also accept the fact there is only a finite amount of matter and energy in creation. There can be no "new" matter or energy, only matter and energy that have been recycled. And were not only matter and energy re-cycled and interchanged then we would run out of matter and energy and creation would reach a state of status wherein matter and energy were forever locked in cold sterility. Don't we, in fact represent this constant play-interplay of matter and energy as the reviving and renewing union of the Goddess and Her consort?

Even more germane to our problem of evil; may that which we perceive so dimly as evil actually be an essential part of this re-cycling of matter/energy? If so, then we have the key example of our Wiccan/Neopagan belief in BALANCE. That is, creative forces must be balanced by destructive forces in order to preserve the interplay between matter and energy...and we represent this by the copulation of the Goddess and Her consort.

Perhaps we shouldn't fear our Goddess as Hag nor run in fear when Pan tosses his horns and roars. Perhaps dimly we can understand life and death, construction and destruction, the coming together and the tearing apart, are necessary to sustain Creation.

Sin...

The true nature of sin generally is misunderstood in Western society and has been for many centuries...one is tempted to suspect, by design. Sin does not involve right and wrong or good and bad; these are moral and ethical concepts. Sin concerns itself with man's deliberate and willful separation from God and man's disobedience of the Law. The Law is that agreement established between man and God: "I'll do this if you'll do that." Although all the major religions and even the so-called primitive religions deal with concepts which my be equated with sin, only Christianity has developed sin to a fine art...indeed, it may be the single pivotal idea which not only separates

Christianity from our Paganism but also from the rest of the religious world. Obviously, the "sin and guilt" trip has paid pretty good dividends within the Judeo-Christian heritage. But these dividends have been garnered at a terrible, terrible price.

We Wiccans and Neopagans may be almost alone in rejecting the concept of sin. Yet, we must reject it if we are to follow logically our view of creation and our place in it. Put it together this way; can a tree sin? no, it can only be a tree; can your cat sin? no, he can only be a cat; can a human sin? no, he can only be a human. In other words, none of us can be wither more or less than our creation. Now, remember what we said about general creation. If we accept this idea of general creation, that we are no different from the other life around us, then we are just as incapable of true sin as the tree or the cat, we can only be what we are...human. To accept the idea of sin means you must also accept the idea of special creation, that our human race is somehow special and god-like and therefore is capable of sin, and if you think so then you are in the wrong pew.

It seems almost blasphemous to me to think our Goddess would in some way create us flawed and imperfect...creatures somehow able to deny our own creation...did She create the tree imperfect, or your cat? Then why should we be??? We are created as humans to be humans and we should find joy in that fact, not sin.

This is the great freedom of Wicca and Neopaganism; that we are free of sin and its guilt trip...that we are left with the admonition that all joy, all mirth, all pleasure are our Goddess' rites.

Fully stated, our Rede declares, "An' it harm none, do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law."

Law, in this usage and as we've mentioned, refers to the relationship between Man and god and this Rede, then, is in total keeping with our contention that man is not special creation but has just the same relationship to divinity as does any other part of creation.

If you have trouble dealing with this, then you are confusing sin and ethics. And ethics is our next topic.

Ethics...

Unlike sin, which is a religious concept and which may be considered as a constant from one age to another...that is, willful separation from God must be the same for any time and place...ethics involve a moral choice between what is deemed right and wrong and with this we come to the realization that which is right in one time and one society, is wrong in another. Thus, the moral and ethical standards of, say, 18th century England and 20th century America hardly are congruent despite a common heritage.

But it is at exactly this point that we Wiccan/Neopagans have introduced a novel idea: a moral and ethical constant:

"Eight words the Wiccan Rede fulfill; An' it harm none, do what ye will."

Now, you and I are fully aware that outsiders first learning of our Rede smirk behind their hands and conjure in their minds all sorts of images or orgies and such. Well, I've been a Crafter for thirty years and more, and I've yet to attend a Craft orgy. so, if any of you are planning on throwing one, I wish you'd invite me, and do hurry before I get too old to enjoy it!

All of which is by way of saying the Rede is widely misunderstood. It simply sounds too much like an unbridled license for hedonism. Of course it is not. But to seek its true meaning we must first go back a few centuries.

the earliest known literary reference to our Rede, "Do what ye will," appears in that marvelous Renaissance satire, Gargantua, written by the French doctor-monk, Francios Rabelais, in 1534. In Book I, a certain monk is very helpful to Gargantua in winning a battle and Gargantua offers him several rich abbeys as reward but the monk rebukes Gargantua, saying, "For how shall I be able to rule over others that have not full power and command over myself?" The monk then asks Gargantua to found an abbey like no other and thus is established the Abbaye de Theleme and the rule of the order is, "Fay ce que voudras"...Do what thou wilt. And this is no libertine license but it is an essential and straightforward clue to our understanding of the Rede.

The second clue to our Rede occurred during the summer of 1918 when Aleister Crowley painted on the Hudson River cliffs south of Kingston, New York, this slogan:

> Every Man And Woman Is A Star!

> Do What Thou Wilt

> Shall Be The Whole Of The Law

Crowley, a man of great scholarship and magick, had recognized the truth expressed in Rabelais and taken it a step further, which Rabelais could not have dared. (Rabelais' printer was burned at the stake for heresy.)

Now, keep in min the Law refers to the relationship established between man and his creation/divinity. All religions have this relationship spelled out as their Law and this Law usually is employed to establish the ethical/moral relationship between men because it is also the ethical/moral relationship between man and God. One, then, is used to justify the other. Thus, there was the attempt to trap Jesus between the religious Law and the moral law but he very handily fielded the question by answering:

"Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and all thy soul, and all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it; thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."

And as Jesus recognized a new Law so Crowley saw in Rabelais' "Fay ce que voudras" a further interpretation of the Law and he expressed it in red paint on the Hudson River cliffs.

At this point it is possible, even tempting, to go off on some very fine semantic nit-picking but that is not our purpose and it would be counter-productive because we are simplistic religionists and such goings on would be like trying to determine how many elementals can dance on the point of an athame and it would only serve to muddy some already confused thinking. Instead, let me offer two very broad brush strokes based on the clues already offered. If these are helpful, then I am more than rewarded; if they are useful thinking tools, then I am twice blessed! So here goes:

When Gargantua's helpful monk refused the offer of rich abbeys, saying, "For how shall I be able to rule over others that have not full power and command over myself?" he established the first part of our understanding of the Rede. Unless and until such time as you are able to exert your own will over yourself, "full power and command," then our Rede, "Do as ye will," has very little meaning because you can't truly will anything, and you are no more than a plaything for every wind that blows. Hardly could you have rule over others. Thus, the first part of the monk's statement, "For how shall I be able to rule over others," has within it the implicit meaning of the first part of our Rede, "An' it harm none." what the monk is saying here is, "How can I be responsible for someone else until I can be responsible for myself?" It would be interesting to further press this declaration because it stands in contradiction to some classical Judeo-Christian concepts concerning man's responsibility to God. And that, no doubt, is the reason Rabelais did not do it. Remember what happened to his printer!

However, Crowley did press the issue another step. If self-responsibility is the Law, then Man is responsible for himself and God is responsible for Himself. So, the interplay between God and Man suddenly is changed; god must be God and man must be Man. And now we are back to where we said we were in our brief discussion of sin...Man can only be man, he can be nothing else. But he is responsible for that.

I hope all of us see in some way the very deep and even mystical and certainly always constant ethical demands placed upon us by our Rede. The Rede is demanding but it yields freedom from the chronic guilt of the past twenty centuries. And it does not leave us the luxury of a cop-out, be it God, Satan, Karma, Fate or a white mule beside a red barn (the mule counts two points).

World View...

In this topic I use the term "World View" to mean how we, as Neopagans, see the material creation around us. I know I already have intimated a great deal about this in previous topics but there is such a fundamental difference between us and the rest of Western society that I believe we must deal with it more directly. To do this, we will work from two premises:

1. That Christianity has taught, objectively and subjectively, material creation somehow is "bad, sinful, evil and corruptive" as opposed to the so-called pure spiritual creation. that the Earth, a material creation, is only a way-station toward some higher spiritual creation, be it heaven or hell, and that this earthly creation eventually will be destroyed come the Millenia/Last Judgment as it must be because it is "sinful" and corruptive of spiritual man.
2. That Neopaganism teaches there is no division between material and spiritual creation and neither can be considered inherently good or bad, pure or corruptive. that the Earth is our home, our only home, and is not some battle ground designed to determine our future existence in a spiritual heaven or hell.

There are deep-rooted implications behind these two differing points of view. In the first case, because the material creation in which we live and are "tested" is somehow inferior and sinful and is only a way-station en route to a "higher" spiritual creation then we are free to despise and abuse this material creation as we see fit. "Yours is the Earth and everything in it." Love Canal, then, has a perfectly sound and reasonable Judeo-Christian premise. However, in the second case, if we, as part of general creation, abuse our Earth, we are abusing ourselves, exactly as Love Canal had demonstrated. And we must at the end finally admit the ecological frustration and fury of this age is because the whimpering ecologists and the Sierra Club have no theology to guide them...only guilt. The Judeo-Christian trip all over again. I'm sure we stand in a much better position.

But don't make the mistake of thinking planetary plunder is an invention of the 20th Century and its technology...far from it. Man has abused his Earth since pre-historic times. Primitive farming and herding practices are among the most destructive ecological force know. The stripping of the Mediterranean Basin is ample proof. So is the collapse of the one great Mayan civilization and the fact that once heavily forested Scotland was forced to import timber for the Baltic as early as the Middle Ages. Indeed, we might well argue the concept of a "sinful" material creation with its implicit license to ravage had to be invented to excuse the earthly pillage that had been going on for several thousand years.

Reincarnation...

I sometimes refer to reincarnation as "the secret belief" because any number of Christians have admitted to me they believe in reincarnation as opposed to orthodox Christian teaching or had had experiences which can only be interpreted as a reincarnitave experience. whether these people actually understand what reincarnation really is may be open to question.

At the outset, then, let's establish the very essential difference between reincarnation and resurrection, as taught in Christian doctrine. Resurrection means at some future time, the Millenia, the Last Judgment, etc. you will be pulled from the grave intact in your present body and you will be in full awareness of yourself and your previous earthly life; that is, you will retain your personal identity. thus, with your present body and personal identity you may be meaningfully rewarded in Heaven or amply punished in Hell. Heaven and Hell have no meaning and no promise or threat unless these conditions of body and identity are met. What good would it be to punish or reward a disembodied spirit with no knowledge of what it was being praised or punished for?

Our concept of reincarnation does not meet either of these criteria. Reincarnation, unlike resurrection, does not automatically imply ultimate survival of the physical body and retention of personal identity. So, any discussion of a Pagan heaven or hell is simply meaningless.

What reincarnation says is survival of life-energy and life-energy has no one body and no one identity. One of the best examples to illustrate this concept of reincarnation is the later stage of the Osiris-Horus myth. In this myth, Osiris is killed by Seth but he is reincarnated as the child Horus and, in various forms, the myth repeats. There is no indication Horus ever remembers himself as Osiris. thus it is with us, sometimes we have a sort of "leakage" across this reincarnation insulator and, with some exceptions, the best we ever get are only picture-postcard glimpses of our previous life-energies.

Eschatology...

Eschatology is only a fancy word for the study of "last things"...that is, death, the Last Judgment, and so forth. For us, eschatology must have an entirely different meaning because we really have no "last things." We are involved in cycles, not beginnings and endings. As Pagans we must view the entire continuum of matter, energy, life force and even time itself as circular. We do not see these things as a piece of string with a beginning and an ending but as that same piece of string tied together to form a circle...our Circle...a repeating cyclical process.

Although definitive physical proof still is lacking, there is a growing belief among some astronomers and astro-physicists that the expanding galaxies of our creation will one day stop their head-long flight and by mutual gravitation slowly and then faster and faster plunge back together again to form a new primal super-molecule world egg. From there, it is only reasonable to assume the creative urge of our Goddess once more will explode this primordial egg to begin a fresh creation.

And, thus, we have come full circle.

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Last modified: August 19 2018 14:52:49